The man who would save Florence
Florence is being eroded (and has been for a good long time) by poor management of visitors’ flow, patchy maintenance of its historic buildings and most of all, loss of cultural identity through series of initiatives that have turned some of its famous landmarks into nothing more than entertainment space.

I heard it, in some detail, from the man who has made it his mission to save the great city.

This of course is not just any man – for Ottaviano de Medici di Toscana, a descendent of the ducal family that made Florence the cultural and artistic centre of the world, this is virtually a crusade of noblesse oblige.

It is of course the Medicis who were also instrumental in preserving the many priceless Florentine treasures we are able to enjoy today - across the generations and often against all odds, through tenacity and the fine-tuned diplomatic manoeuvring their name has become synonymous with.

This scion of the Neapolitan branch of the family is determined, smart, cultured and supremely skilled in the art of, well… being a Medici.

For those who need a history refresher, here is a brief footnote: The Medici family controlled Florence throughout much of the Renaissance and played a large part in the patronage of the arts and the political development of the city. They supported the arts, commissioned the building of imposing cathedrals, and then, some of the best artists at the time to decorate them.

Florence was known as the centre of the Renaissance and great thinkers and artists were attracted to it by the reputation of its rulers. Under Lorenzo de Medici, known as ‘Il Magnifico Lorenzo’, Florence became the most important city-state in Italy and the most beautiful city in all of Europe. However, Lorenzo neglected the family business to the point where the Medicis were forced to flee Florence two years after his death.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CITY IN THE WORLD IS UNDER THREAT.
What is less known is that the Florentine collections have remained in place primarily because of Anna Maria Luisa de Medici’s shrewdness: in 1737, she granted the Medici art collections to the next rulers, the House of Hapsburg-Lorraine, on condition that “nothing from them be transported or removed from the Capital or the State of the Grand Duchy,” where they should remain “for the ornament of the State, the utility of the Public, and to attract the curiosity of Foreigners.”

These legally binding terms have been invoked ever since, to return looted art to Florence and Tuscany.

Fast-forward to present days…

The Uffizi and Palazzo Vecchio have perpetual queues waiting to “do the sites” — these are cruise ship tourists, being delivered by busloads; day visitors, art students and art lovers, of course.

For the most part, these people are neither aware of, nor perhaps even care much about the less famous but equally amazing buildings standing at virtually every corner of old Florence. Some have fallen into woeful disrepair; others are simply tucked away from the main tourist and shopping artery.

This, de Medici says, has created a great deal of hardship and even the demise of traditional artisans who pay high rents to be there, yet get no foot traffic if their shops are in an alley off the main street.

The man who would save Florence has not put a foot wrong since creating the Association for saving Florence. He has used the fine diplomacy his ancestors were noted for to get the ear of UNESCO by submitting a damning report on the failures of local government to preserve the national heritage.

It is not just buildings and frescos that are being eroded, says de Medici — there is the less tangible but just as potent loss of historical and cultural identity through associating important buildings with commercial brands.
De Medici pulls no punches when it comes to condemning what he refers to as the improper use of these buildings. This is an excerpt from his press release: “Also the association will soon send to UNESCO the information about the recent decision of the Mayor of the City of renting Forte Belvedere and many other cultural or historical monuments for improper private events, like the wedding of the rap singer Kanye West with TV trash star Kim Kardashian or the events that have recently taken place in Ponte Vecchio, Forte Belvedere and the Duomo for strongly advertising the activity of some Italian fashion designer. The mayor is also planning on placing a 70 m high panoramic Viennese wheel right in the historic city center!”

One of the supremely clever initiatives the foundation has come up with is to start a Census – or a record documenting the urban decay in Florence. De Medici is not exerting pressure on the government himself, other than by firing the occasional witty shot across the bows – as when he flew the ancestral flag of the Medici family in front of Palazzo Vecchio, along with a group of supporters dressed in period costumes. The city reacted nervously and banned his colourful display as “offensive”. What he does do – and he concedes this is a very “Medici” thing to do – is enlist the wide-ranging powers of UNESCO’s World Heritage on his side – or rather, on the side of his crusade and thus, compelling the government to act.

His proposal is two-pronged: he has developed a plan of action for saving Florence’s cultural heritage and another business plan to address the rapidly declining artisanat that still remains there, if only just.

The Medicis will ride high again, he hopes, through a modern day patronage of the arts and culture, and through resuming their role as custodians of both.

Note: Since our meeting with Ottaviano de Medici, he has been invited to sit, in his capacity of President of the Medici Association, on the technical committee formed jointly by the Municipality and University of Florence for the purpose of managing and enhancing the UNESCO designated site that Florence city centre is. Clearly, his campaign is paying dividends.

www.saveflorence.it